

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. An electrosurgical instrument for removing tissue from a target site within or on a patient's body comprising:

(a) a shaft having proximal and distal end portion and an active screen electrode on the distal end portion;

(b) a return electrode arranged on the shaft spaced from the screen electrode;

(c) at least one electrical connector extending through the shaft that connects the active electrode with a high frequency power supply;

(d) at least one electrical coupling member adapted to secure the active screen electrode to the shaft and to electrically couple the screen electrode to the a least one electrical connector; and

(e) an aspiration lumen within the shaft having a distal opening coupled to the single active electrode wherein the screen electrode inhibits clogging of the aspiration lumen.

2. The instrument of claim 1 wherein the screen electrode comprises at least one aperture for passage of tissue fragments and fluid therethrough.

3. The instrument of claim 1 wherein the screen electrode is disposed on a lateral side of the shaft.

4. The instrument of claim 1 further comprising an electrically insulating support member upon which the active screen electrode is mounted to, the support member comprising an inorganic material.

5. The instrument of claim 4 wherein the support member has an axial opening in communication with the aspiration lumen, and a lateral opening in contact with the active electrode.

6. The instrument of claim 1 wherein the return electrode is a ring-shaped.

7. The instrument of claim 1 wherein the return electrode is spaced from the active electrode such that, when the active electrode is brought adjacent a tissue structure immersed in electrically conductive fluid, the active electrode is positioned between the

return electrode and the tissue structure and the electrically conductive fluid completes a conduction path between the active electrode and the return electrode.

8. The instrument of claim 7 wherein the active and return electrodes are configured, upon the application of a sufficiently high frequency voltage therebetween, to vaporize the fluid in a thin layer over at least a portion of the active electrode and to induce the discharge of energy from the vapor layer.
9. The instrument of claim 1 wherein said at least one electrical coupling member is a ballwire.
10. The instrument of claim 1 wherein said at least one electrical coupling member comprises a plurality of electrical coupling members.
11. The instrument of claim 2 wherein said apertures in the screen electrode comprises a plurality of apertures.
12. The instrument of claim 11 wherein said apertures are circular.
13. The instrument of claim 11 wherein said apertures comprise corners.
14. The instrument of claim 13 wherein said apertures are rectangular.
15. The instrument of claim 4 further comprising a cap arranged on the distal end portion of the shaft wherein said cap comprises an opening that receives said insulating support.
16. A method for treating target tissue comprising removing said target tissue using an instrument as recited in claim 1.
17. The method of claim 16 wherein said target tissue is within a joint.
18. The method of claim 17 wherein said tissue is selected from the group consisting of meniscus, synovial tissue, and articular cartilage.

19. The method of claim 16 wherein said aspiration lumen is connected with a vacuum source to aspirate material through said aspiration lumen.

20. The instrument of claim 15 wherein said cap is electrically conductive and forms a portion of the return electrode.

21. An electrosurgical instrument for removing tissue from a target site within or on a patient's body comprising:

(a) a shaft having proximal and distal end portion and an active screen electrode on the distal end portion;

(b) a return electrode arranged on the shaft spaced from the screen electrode;

(c) at least one electrical connector extending through the shaft, said at least one electrical connector being electrically coupled to said active electrode and to a high frequency power supply; and

(d) an aspiration lumen within the shaft having a distal opening coupled to the single active electrode wherein the screen electrode inhibits clogging of the aspiration lumen.